

Archeology at Gaines' Mill: Search for the Orchard



Who are you?

We are National Park Service archeologists and historical landscape architects.

What are you looking for?

The Watt House orchard. It was the location of the 5th Massachusetts Battery of the Union Army. This position was the focal point for the Confederate assault that won the engagement for the southern forces.

How will you know when you find it?

Trees leave traces of discolored soil. These “features” are examined by carefully exposing their outlines. If they look like root systems, then wood and pollen samples will be collected to determine if they were fruit trees as described in the historic records.

Why look here?

Historic maps suggest that the battery and orchard were located in this general area. However, other evidence suggests it may have been north of the Watt House where the small stable is located.

How do you decide where to dig the holes?

Digging “where it must be” is a good way to find out how wrong our assumptions about the past are. To reduce this bias, the general area was divided into a grid and a statistical sample was generated so that any part had equal chance of being selected for excavation.

Why are the holes square?

The holes are square so that each has roughly the same volume of soil. This allows for easy comparison of the distribution and density of artifacts recovered from them. It also makes it much easier to read changes in the soil.

What happens to the artifacts and records from the project?

All of the artifacts, photographs, and records will be curated at Richmond National Battlefield Park. The results will be incorporated into the ongoing archeological survey of Gaines' Mill. Highlights and a summary of the results will appear on the park's web site.